

FLYAWAY PRODUCTIONS

by Jo Kreiter

EXPANDING CHOREOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE

[Flyaway Productions](#) is an apparatus-based dance company offering performance and dance training to the public. Its mission is to support the integration of experimental forms with social and political content; the support of women artists, where



women's voices remain an underserved element of public culture as a whole; and the use of spectacle/flight/suspended apparatus to expand choreographic language. In the following essay, Flyaway Productions' Artistic Director and Choreographer, Jo Kreiter, writes about her inspiration and work in the creation of "The Ballad of Polly Ann," a piece honoring women bridge builders in the Bay Area.

JO KREITER SAYS ...

I instigate dance projects that advance female empowerment in the public realm. At its core, my work explores the female body – its tumultuous expressions of strength and fragility. Physically, the work experiments with height, speed and gravity. My work is part of a feminist discourse on the body and the transformation of women's images in the public domain, as a means to affect women's self-esteem in their public and private lives. My work is revealed through performance, training and community building programs.

Ten years ago I made a dance on the last hand-operated crane on the San Francisco Waterfront called "Copra Dock Dances." We had to canoe to rehearsal because the crane sat in the middle of Islais Creek where it pours into the bay. I got to climb a 90 foot tower of steel, swing from its support beams and dance on its highest I-beams, balancing against the sway of the water below me.

Now, ten years later, I have just completed a sequel to that dance called "The Ballad of Polly Ann." Deepening my focus on California labor history, I connected up with [Tradeswomen Inc.](#), hired a historian, and collected the oral histories of six women bridge builders who have worked on Bay Area bridges. The title came from the legend of John Henry. In many versions of the folksong, including the one by Bruce Springsteen on the Seeger Sessions, when John Henry dies, his wife Polly Ann picks up his hammer and 'drives that steel just like a man.'

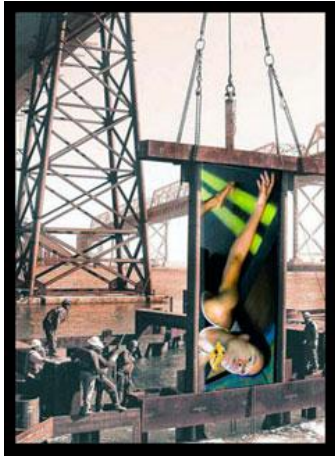
During the past year, Flyaway and I have created a movement language that reflects the physical and emotional risks embedded in bridge builders' relentless physical labor. In particular, we have mined women's experience with physical work, tools, heights, and machinery as well as their cultural experience working in a male dominated labor force, and how that affected their sense of self,



femininity, family, and self worth. It takes a particular kind of woman to work in the trades. Feisty. Independent. Mechanically intelligent. It also takes a particular kind of woman to be a dancer. I have been interested in what the two have in common, and how we differ. We share a devotion to physical process and physical challenges. Both groups of women are a cultural minority; both are small in number in the world, but large in our own power and certainty. Our rates of pay could not differ more. However, women in the trades face horrific and at times life threatening sexism, often on a daily basis. Contemporary dancers working inside a female dominated culture simply do not.

california arts council

One of the trades I have found fascinating is pile driving. Pile drivers have to work in exquisite cooperation to drive the support structures of a bridge into the ground with a mechanical hammer. It takes hoisting, precision and split-second communication. In "The Ballad of Polly Ann," we replicated a section of bridge that tilts vertically and horizontally, shifting its meaning as it changes



position. On it we created a dance that explores pile driving. The dancers work with the swing of the bridge section to replicate the rhythm of the mechanical hammer. They, too, are working with split-second timings. We have crashed and burned several times in rehearsal. This particular choreography is probably the hardest thing I have ever asked dancers to do. But after several months we are on the other side of the risks now and have managed to make an exquisite dance that captures both the heartbeat and rigorous mechanics of driving pile.

Most challenging for me about this project is the knowledge that I am creating a dance about the lives of real women who are alive and well. More than half of the women we interviewed are still working in their fields. It is an awesome responsibility to try to honor someone's work, especially knowing they are going to come to the show to check it out. It brings many questions to the process. How true to their stories should I be? What movement invention serves their experience? Will I honor or offend? I love the responsibility inherent in these questions, just as I love the innovation and generosity that Flyaway's dancers bring to my process.

Many of the tradeswomen's stories offered me immediate choreographic direction. For example, we are embracing the fear a crane operator carries with her every day while she sits high above everyone and is responsible for the safety of the whole job

site. We took that fear and made it dynamic, suspended, and quick to fall, catch and release.

We inhabited the sense of service felt by a laborer working under the bridge, within spitting distance of the water. Her work is both crucial to, and invisible to, the public. We chose to explore her feelings of contributing to the public good with a dance where a woman is moving and being moved by a tiny toy car. The dance conjured images of community, mobility, social interaction and the freedom to cross bridges.

I reach constantly for the right balance of art and politics, spectacle and content. I am grateful to be able to archive tradeswomen's stories through dance, where daily work and kinetic imagination coincide. I am grateful for funders like the California Arts Council, who recognize that art holds a vital place in our complicated lives.

"The Ballad of Polly Ann" spoke well to people in the trades who have never seen contemporary dance before. It also spoke to general audiences who had no idea that women build bridges. This makes me feel like I am a part of the world, and that my work serves.

Listen to interview on KALW FM on [Women and Labor on Your Call Radio](#), taped July 15, 2009. Host: Rose Aguilar; Guests: Jo Kreiter, Molly Martin, and Harvey Schwartz.

Photo Credits by order (1-4 by Austin Forbord, composite by Austin Forbord & Joseph A. Blum): 1. Dancer in Polly Ann composite: Raissa Simpson (Art Works! icon); 2. Solo Dancer Laughing: Mary Ann Brooks; 3. Solo Dancer on Bridge Tower: Jennifer Chien; 4. Dancers on Hanging Road: Brit Karhoff & Melissa Caywood.

Flyaway Productions received funding from the California Arts Council's Creating Public Value Program (CPV) for "The Ballad of Polly Ann" and its upcoming work, "Singing Praises: Centennial Dances for the Women's Building." The CPV Program supports arts organizations in rural or underserved communities through projects making a positive contribution to the individual and collective lives of all Californians. For more information on CPV, contact [Lucero Arellano](#).

